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Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory

“I DON’T KNOW WHY A REPLICANT WOULD COLLECT PHOTOS—MAYBE they were like Rachel—they needed memories.” In the role of the bounty hunter Rick Deckard in Ridley Scott’s 1982 cult classic, *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford utters these words with a bitter edge. Assigned to “terminate” the beautiful Rachel, an “android” especially menacing because she’s almost (almost!) indistinguishable from a “real” person, Deckard lusts after her and wants to be sure she’s human, not machine-made, before bedding her. Based on Phillip K. Dick’s brilliant science fiction novel of 1968, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the film adds the bit of sentiment about collecting photographs to the otherwise unmitigated darkness of Phillip Dick’s vision of a near future. The year is 2021, and by means of mechanical replication—the electric sheep of Dick’s title—warm-blooded animal life has been all but totally replaced by replicants, copies or duplications of almost forgotten originals. Memories of real sheep and toads and living human flesh are struggling against the irresistible tide of a programmed second-order reality unburdened by personal or cultural memory.

In the film version memory survives paradoxically only as a faint reminder of itself, a remembered need to a memory and thereby an individual identity. Here’s where the collected photographs come in. They answer to the need for at least an illusion of memory. Deckard vents his angst just after Rachel leaves his apartment in tears, her self-

delusion shattered by the hardboiled bounty-hunter's refusal to accept the presumptive snapshot of a mother and child fished from her purse as proof of human rather than laboratory birth. "Look," she had said, "here's me with my mother." But Deckard knows better; he has his own tests for androids or "humanoid robots." True, she's a special model, long-lasting and seductively beautiful but still a replicant. "Not your memories," Deckard had said to her, "but some else's," a "synthetic memory system" as fraudulent as the faked photo.

Crushed, Rachel leaves him musing at his piano, flipping through another set of faked "old" snapshots he had commandeered from another android. He has also spread his own family snapshots on the piano top, some faded, browned, curling with age and use. These photos are presumably the real thing, true memories of a past that actually happened. Replicants collect photos because they need memories in order to believe they are human, a need itself programmed into their system. The photos in the film are something like the electric sheep in the novel, fake pets in the absence of real ones. In such a world, where the photograph has lost its ground of reference in the past, where the surrogate assumes the look and force of the real, Deckard's faded personal photos represent pure nostalgia; they are symbols of a life already lived, a dream of the human persisting in the nightmare world of replicants dreaming of electric sheep.

With its cult status as book and film, the story has an aura of foreknowing coming events in real-world genetic engineering and robotics. The pathos of the photograph as faked memory strikes an especially prescient note. As far as we can tell, the photos collected by the androids were made by actual cameras, with lenses and film. The chief point is that their fakery lies in their use, their implied captions or texts and narratives, the fictions that falsely identify them as memories of a past that never was. Yet many of the pictures Deckard holds in his hand seem to have been made by the replicants themselves, of their rooms, of one another—all the more ironic and pathetic examples of futile and abortive yearning for human emotion, attachment to things and persons who can be thought to represent a tangible past. The film

accepts the traditional idea of the photograph as reliable proof that something once existed before a lens. What is false about the pictures is not what is pictured but the implied story about what is pictured: "Look, here's me with my mother." In fact, Deckard has such faith in the first-order reliability of photographs that he uses an enhancement on a digital scanner of a tiny section of one of the commandeered snapshots to identify one of the rebellious androids he is assigned to destroy. In the film, digital scanners serve to deconstruct images in order to see more of what is there, rather than to reconstruct an image of something that is nowhere else but in the image. In this sense the film seems to stand firmly within the horizon of conventional photography, even as it envisions the limits of that horizon, the end of the era of the photograph as memory in the old, familiar sense.

As represented in *Blade Runner* the kind of picture known as "photograph" (written in light, literally) conveys the traditional association of memory and history with photography. Today that simple idea of a light-based transparent nexus between photograph and a determinate past is undergoing radical reappraisal. The digital revolution, as probably everybody on earth now realizes, has eroded the old confidence in that transparency. We and our comfortably reliable old paper photographs now live alongside the all-pervasive digital method of producing replicas, virtual replicants, of the old photographic image without the old apparatus of lenses and film, or indeed of anything we need believe was ever to be photographed.

Calling these new instruments "electronic photography" or "digital camera," we employ metaphors in hope of easing the passage into a new regime of picturing the putative "real world." But as William J. Mitchell points out in his recent book, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, this particular metaphor misleads, obscures the digital difference. He writes: "Although a digital image may look just like a photograph when it is published in a newspaper, it actually differs as profoundly from a traditional photograph as does a photograph from a painting" (1992: 4). Based on changes in chemical emulsions caused by exposure to light, old-style photographs are analog or continuous tone

images; computer-generated images are digital, based on discrete units called pixels, entirely the product of computer programs.

These programs may include actual photographs converted into digital images, which then can be altered, reprocessed, or recombined to produce an image as if made in the old manner of light-generated images. The hardware for producing such electronic images has swept the mass market: Kodak's Photo CD Player, for example, converts snapshots into still video, and electronic cameras can digitize the image as it is being recorded by light. The image can be manipulated even as it is being "captured." As a result, writes Mitchell, we are faced "with a new uncertainty about the status and interpretation of the visual signifier" (Mitchell, 1992: 17). On an ominous note he adds: "The inventory of comfortably trustworthy photographs that has formed our understanding of the world for so long seems destined to be overwhelmed by a flood of digital images of much less certain status" (1992: 19).

Such radical technological change in image-making affects the mass experience as well as the theoretical understanding of photography as memory. Imagine memory as a storage area where images or traces of past sensations lie in wait of retrieval on call or involuntarily. In analogue photography memory takes the form of the material negative, an image held in an emulsion on celluloid. When reproduced in a chemical-mechanical process that reverses the making of the negative, the image gives a "positive" picture that is the memory proper. It is an extractive process, from negative to positive, from potency to reality—a second or reborn reality of the sensory past as a positive picture. In digital photography memory potency and reality lose their distinctiveness. In place of a store of images (such as negative versions of positive pictures) are electronic "chips" that compress electrical changes that can be called up, shaped and reshaped by command as images that *look like* those of a sensory past though are not necessarily so. In the old photography the camera is an instrument of memory; in the new photography the camera itself serves as electronic repository of memory from which a past, a simulacrum of any past, can be called up and programmatically shaped.

If the nineteenth century invented photography, the late-twentieth-century began to disinvent it. We've learned how machines can be made to mimic or replicate human ways of seeing, and with robotic modes of mass production cheap versions of replication devices are available to everyone on earth. It has been a quiet cultural revolution of incalculable consequence. Everywhere you look you see people with these slips of metal and plastic instruments not peering at the world through a view finder but looking for the world at or on the back of the new-style "camera" (another sly metaphor) with its screen or monitor. The wonder is that people have adjusted to this new phenomenon so easily, as if without a grunt or ripple, perhaps with minor annoyance at the baffling array of choices among digital settings that soon gives way to happy complacency. But think of what happens. It is as if the world given to the eyesight no longer lies in front of the instrument of seeing but on its backside, already processed into image: a digital version of seeing through a glass, darkly.

The new photography elides so well with the old, and digital image-making couples so smoothly with laptops and desktops, that snapshot memory has taken an amazingly radical turn. Most users of these compact boxes rigged with hi-tech switches and chips may barely notice the difference. But difference is real and stunning. It teaches a high-stake lesson about our lingering assumptions regarding photographs and memory. People seem still to believe that if it looks like a photo, it must be one of the old kind, a record of something that truly happened. Post-photography undermines that glib assumption. Mitchell's image of a flood hardly exaggerates. With electronic image-making having effectively taken over and computer memory established as the matrix of images-of-the-world, we are already well within the era of post-photography.

A backward look can help us better see what lies ahead. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century the most commonplace idea of photography was of its role as memory. People spoke in awe of how photographs made the past seem here and now, restored to visual presence in ghostly vividness. The notion of photography as a

form of memory unique among the visual arts became the groundwork conception of the medium. It seemed archetypically true, a proposition held with spontaneous conviction. Didn't the camera reproduce with automatic mechanical accuracy exactly what appeared before the lens during a measurable slice of time? Recording the world as it looked through a lens within a distinct duration meant that the resultant picture offered to the eyes an image of time that was already a particular determinate "past" when the exposure ended.

BELIEF IN PHOTOGRAPHS AS TRUE PICTURES OF THE PAST COMES FROM apparent correspondence between them and images we hold in the mind and call "our" memory, traces of what our eyes once delivered to our brains. Collecting and preserving snapshots, making family albums, pinning pictures of loved ones on the wall, all are based on the belief that photographs are remnants of past experience, image-remnants of past feelings, associations, stories, the stuff of the pictures we carry in our heads of our pasts, of the private history we have lived and the public history we share with overlapping communities. Indeed, the line between private and public began to blur as more and more photo-images of private life began to circulate in the expanding public sphere to the point where all private lives and intimate experiences now seem grist for the insatiable public eye of the mass media, including the snooping eye of government surveillance.

Between the photograph and history in the sense of everything past, there was assumed to be an absolute continuity assured by nature and by culture working in tandem: light acting on certain chemically treated surfaces within a controlled interior site, the "dark chamber" of the camera by means of a controlling mechanism of lens, shutter, secure slot for the plate to be exposed to light. The cultural part was to assure an image "fixed" or stable on the model of paintings, drawings, or engravings, the older tradition of referential image-making used to represent and confirm a "real" world. Photography made the real seem the function of memory, image-traces of the visible world preserved on its exposed plates. The camera was understood to be a machine for

freezing time into recoverable images in this, as Roland Barthes (1981) remarks in *Camera Lucida*, renouncing "the Monument" on behalf of the passing and the fleeting. Barthes calls it a paradox that "the same century invented History and Photography," History substituting memory for life, photography giving "a certain but fugitive testimony." Accordingly, the camera produces not "the Past" but the intractableness of "what has been." Nothing fugitive can escape its pounce and its paralyzing memorial gaze.

One of the inventors of photography, the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot, spoke of his pictures as "impressed by Nature's hand," as if the making of a photograph were equivalent to the action of a bed of type upon a sheet of paper in a printing press. The printer is "Nature" itself, possessed now, by virtue of the camera, of a "hand" by which it imprints itself in the form of image, of what Talbot dubbed "calotype" (from the Greek word for beauty) or, proprietorially, as "talbotype." Talbot titled his 1844 book of pictures and commentary *The Pencil of Nature*, a trope that links the new medium to both drawing and writing, to media of imaginative creativity. Scientist, inventor, gentleman scholar, Talbot was also one of the original artists in photography who explored the new medium's aesthetic possibilities in picturing.

For Talbot, the power of the sun gave rise to "one of the charms of photography," that unexpected discoveries can be had through close reading of what the pencil of nature has writ:

in examining photographic pictures of a certain degree of perfection, the use of a large lens is recommended, such as elderly persons frequently employ in reading. This magnifies the objects two or three times, and often discloses a multitude of minute details, which were previously unobserved and unsuspected. It frequently happens, moreover—and this is one of the charms of photography—that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has depicted many things he had

no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls: sometimes a distant dial-plate is seen, and upon it—unconsciously recorded—the hour of the day at which the view was taken (plate 13).

This extraordinary account of what the eye missed reveals that claims of certainty in the camera-made picture of the world are contingent on perception. The words “unconsciously recorded” suggest simply that the mechanism of the camera records more than the photographer knows at the time, that “time” is in fact one of the unregistered visual elements in the image. The photograph provides a record of what the mind might have known had it been aware of the totality of its visual field at that moment. The unconscious field Talbot calls attention to is a dial-plate, a human mechanism for translating the movement of a shadow across a calibrated surface into a human discourse of time, into a grammar of number, name, and tense. What Talbot discovers at the buried heart of this image is the artifice of language, the arbitrary devices and constructions that underlie all human cultures.

About a hundred years later in 1931 essay, the German critic Walter Benjamin also speaks of an “optical unconscious” in photographs. He refers to old nineteenth-century portraits made at the dawn of the medium:

All the artistic preparations of the photographer and the design of in the positioning of the model to the contrary, the viewer feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now. In such a picture, that spark has, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality, finding the indiscernible place in the condition of that long past minute where the future is nesting, even today, so eloquently that we looking back can discover it (1980: 202).

Benjamin's optical unconscious refers to what appears in the image unintended, not the product of the photographer's will but a sign of the contingency involved in the making of the photograph: a blur or the glint of light in an eye quite unlike any handmade inscription in a painting or drawing. It comes from the photographic process, from the duration of time in which exposure occurs. Most important for Benjamin is the notion that such unconscious signs of life as the look we return to a sitter's eyes construct the palpable sense of a future "nesting" within the past registered by the image. The photograph's past contains its future, a future realized when the picture is seen by a viewer, received in another's eyes. As viewers we are the future of the past recorded in the image; we realize the presentness of that past. The relation to time, then, gives the photograph its distinguishing traits for Benjamin; the image contains time, not a picturetime passing but an experience of a past exactly at the instant it crosses into an indeterminate future.

Another early witness, Elizabeth Barrett, future wife of the poet Robert Browning, made a similar point when she wrote longingly in 1843 of the photograph as a prosthesis of private memory.

I long to have such a memorial of every being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases—but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing . . . the fact of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever! It is the very sanctification of portraits I think—and it is not at all monstrous in me to say, what my brothers cry out against so vehemently, that I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest artist's work every produced (Heron and Williams, 1996: 2).

Barrett speaks of the daguerreotype, whose images appeared on a mirror-like sheet of metal that could, when held at a certain angle, produce what seemed "the very shadow of the person." The conception

of an intimate memorial image that will not fade but retain its brilliance fit nicely into sentimental middle-class culture of the time. By making palpable the absence of the sitter, making that person appear as already having been, the photograph rehearsed the experience of mourning at the heart of sentimentalism.

The notion of the photograph as an uncanny memory continued with the introduction of paper prints. New technologies of reproduction extended the memorializing claims for the medium so that when Baudelaire in 1859 described the “true duty” of photography as that of a “humble handmaid” of art rather than an art in its own right, he evoked precisely those imperial claims: “Let photography quickly enrich the traveler’s album and restore to his eyes the precision his memory may lack. . . . Let it save crumbling ruins from oblivion . . . the prey of time, all those precious things, vowed to dissolution, which claim a place in the archives of our memories” (1980: 88). At the same time Lady Elizabeth Eastlake in England in 1857 also argued against confusing photography with fine art. Photographs are simply too accurate, too precise, too indiscriminate; for this very reason they answer best the modern need for empirical knowledge. A “purveyor” of knowledge, “she [photography] is the sworn witness of everything presented to her view; she gives “unerring records.” Her realm is fact, not art, and the facts she renders are unsurpassed in communicative power—a “new form of communication between man and man—neither letter, message, nor picture.” “In this sense,” Eastlake continues in high-toned prophecy, “no photographic picture that ever was taken in heaven, or earth, or in the waters underneath the earth, of any thing, or scene, however defective when measured by an artistic scale, is destitute of a special, and what may be called an historic interest.” City views may be weak in tonality compared to what painting can achieve, “yet the facts of the age and the hour are there, for we count the lines in that keen perspective of telegraphic wire, and read the characters on that playbill or manifesto, destined to be torn down on the morrow.” Here, then, is photography’s “legitimate stand”: “her business is to give evidence of facts, as minutely

and as impartially as, to our shame, only an unreasoning machine can give" (1980: 65-67).

Unreasoning machine, evidence of facts: the terminology seems dated and naïve in our age of artificial intelligence, digital scanners, random access memory—a world more like that of replicants and blade runners than the world of Daguerre and Mathew Brady. Digital photography reinforces recent post-Enlightenment suspicion that "reality" is something made up, a construction, not something secure for a camera to confirm. More likely the camera is part of the game, not to be trusted as a guide to anything but itself. Still, the confidence of nineteenth-century witnesses remains a tenet of popular belief much exploited by commercial advertising for digital cameras. Our typical curiosity about photographs, like Deckard's, tells us as much.

In recent years a growing number of historians have begun to explore common ground with the photographer. It has been pointed out that historian and photographer share the business of discerning and describing fact, which is transformed then into narrative or picture. The act of transformation, as Siegfried Kracauer and others have observed, gives presence to what is absent, what has passed away. "The photographic media," Kracauer wrote in 1969 (192), "makes it easier for us to incorporate the transient phenomena of the outer world, thereby redeeming them from oblivion. Something of this kind will also have to be said of history." Hence, for Kracauer, history as writing and photography as picturing parallel and complement each other as modes of saving, preserving, fixing, knowing, and finally redeeming physical reality from the fate of mere transience.

But the analogy goes only so far. What historians produce as "history" are mainly written texts. Images may be seen as analogous to words but not identical with them; they are a different kind and order of thing from narrative or written description. Andre Bazin has said that the photograph is an actual portion of the visible world, a physical trace or residue of an actual event within light. In this view the photograph appears to be less cognate with written history than with the raw materials of written history: traces of lived experience such as letters,

journals, artifacts, the data historians sort through, arrange, measure, analyze, and interpret. It is not an identity but a symbiosis that links photography and history: the historian needs the visual record as supplementary data or information; the image needs the historian or historically minded viewer to read in its hieroglyphic markings the possibility of meaning.

WHETHER WE SAY PHOTOGRAPHS ARE MERELY SURFACE DESCRIPTIONS or interpretations analogous to written history comes down to how we look at the image. We look in order to recognize what exists in the recorded field of vision. Choices in the act of viewing are rarely as deliberate and reflective as this account makes it seem, but as a general rule we choose to see a photograph either as a mechanical transcription of a field of light with randomly disposed objects, or as an intentional reordering of that field into a deliberate meaning. We can look at the picture as the world, or the maker's mind or imagination playing upon the world. Photographs typically provoke and pose questions. What is it? When and where was it made? What does it mean? We desire and need more information than the image alone. Uncaptioned, a photograph can seem a mote floating in space, unmoored, unattached. Or a cryptic hieroglyph. Hieroglyphs hide the codes, the secret knowledge they require for decipherment. For all their apparent transparency and ease of identification, photographs often seem hieroglyphic, obscure, ambiguous, elusive, the more so the more transparently window-like they seem. The bafflement photographs inevitably arouse in close, attentive viewers at some stage of their viewing is a good thing. The era of digital post-photography brings a healthy infusion of skepticism to our reading and experience of photographs old-style or new, analogue or digital.

The old regime photograph (analogue) had seemed a certifier of authenticity, an assurance that here at least was a sign that matched a referent. Hence on the centenary of photography in 1939, Paul Valéry could put down in words a sentiment that may sound oddly naïve in our ears: "The mere notion of photography, when we introduce it into

our meditation on the genesis of historical knowledge and its true value, suggests this simple question: Could such and such a fact, as it is narrated, have been photographed?" (1980: 195). The Civil War photographs associated with the name of Mathew Brady offer a case in point: they perpetuate a collective cultural image of what that war must have looked like to those who saw it. Civil War photographs continue to historicize the war, to confirm that certain events took place then and there: this is how places and persons would have looked had you been there, pristine landscapes, ruined cities, battlefields wreckage, the shapeless debris of war, signs of violence, pain, and terrible deaths. "These time-stained photographs," wrote historian Francis Trevelyan Miller in 1911 in the monumental and monumentalizing 10-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War* are the only incontrovertible facts to survive the partisan passions of the war (Miller, 1911: 16). The pictures "bring past history," wrote another historian, "into the present tense" (George Haven Putnam in Miller, 1911: 60).

This positivist view claims that memory is whatever survives from the past as present experience, not something shaped by will or desire but only what is left over from the great passage of time. This view of memory pretends to pure objectivity, and like classic nineteenth-century historicism ("how it really was") denies its own ideological complicity in saying what are and were "the facts." Constructions such as the grand "photographic history" and its more famous companion, the film by D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), foreclose and forbid ambiguity of interpretation. Once certainties quaver, the whole edifice of "Civil War" as cultural memory risks coming apart. Hence the fervency of the 1912 presentation of the largest selection of Civil War photographs ever published, a fervent race-based nationalism that attaches each image to an urgent idea of the war and the nation. The pictures either support the following assumption or the nation as an idea falls in shambles.

This is the American epic that is told in these time-stained photographs—an epic which in romance and chivalry is

more inspiring than that of the olden knighthood; brother against brother, father against son, men speaking the same language, living under the same flag, offering their lives for that which they believe to be right. No Grecian phalanx or Roman legion ever knew truer manhood than in those days on the American continent when Anglo-Saxon met Anglo-Saxon in the decision of a constitutional principle that beset their beloved nation. It was more than Napoleonic, for its warriors battled for principle rather than conquest, for right rather than power. (Miller, 1911: 16).

The pictures in the 10-volume history produce what the text names as “the American War of the Roses,” a war of brothers based on a disagreement over a principle—the allusion is to “state’s rights,” the Confederacy’s preferred rationale for its secession. “We must all be of one and the same mind,” we read, “when we look upon the photographic evidence. It is in these photographs that all Americans can meet on the common ground of their beloved traditions. Here we are all united at the shrine where our fathers fought—Northerners or Southerners.” “As Americans” looking at these pictures “we can see only the heroic-self-sacrifice of these men who battled.” Slavery excised blacks, extirpated and driven from sight, “we” confirm ourselves “as Americans” by seeing “only” what the text sees and says we see, by seeing, as it were, Anglo-Saxonly. (Miller, 1911: 18).

The 1912 appropriation of the photographic record of the war gives an extreme instance of ideology trumping vision. The same ideology of race, of “Anglo-Saxon” superiority, dominance, and privilege that by the end of the nineteenth century had purged slavery and blacks from public memory and memorializing events of the war also asserted exclusive rights of interpretation over the photographs. The power of photographs as cultural memory, the memory of events or persons we could not have experienced firsthand except through photographs, derives from ingrained belief that every photograph portrays at least the raw material of memory, shows what memory is.

This assumes that, whatever else it shows by way of composition and design, each photograph cannot help but show a residue of something that once existed before a lens. By reflex alone photographs produce memory.

But the Civil War photographs teach that without accompanying words, without captions or surrounding text, photographs remain helpless examples of indiscriminate visual experience open to many understandings. They become cultural memory only by deliberate acts of will and purpose. Those moved to contest the larger frame of memory imposed on the photographs, as in the 1912 volumes as well as albums by Alexander Gardner, George P. Barnard, and others that appeared shortly after the war, can begin by freeing images from their putative frame in order to open the eyes to neglected, repressed, or forgotten memories. To imagine alternative captions offers a path toward revised and refreshed collective memories. As much an interpretation of the present as the past, and an anticipation of a future, the framing of visual memory can have major consequences on how people identify shared historical culture. It is not cultural memory of the Civil War as such that is at stake but the role that photographs play in any version of the past we call memory.

Gardner makes explicit this theory of the photograph in his preface to the *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*, where he speaks of wishing to preserve images of “localities that would scarcely have been known, and probably never remembered” if it were not for “the fearful struggle” of the war, signs of which may or may not be visible in the local scene. Gardner’s task as editor of the volume is to provide a textual means to connect the local with the national, the particularity of the scene with the grand narrative of the constructed cultural memory. Local images become “mementoes of the fearsome struggle,” and “remembered” becomes another form of re-connection or “union” (“reunification”), of “re-mem-bering” broken or dis-membered localities (such as the rebellious states) to resume wholeness or to make one body with the newly confirmed nation. Anticipating 1912, Gardner writes about haunting battlefield scenes such as the famous “Harvest

of Death,” that they are “held sacred as memorable fields, where thousands of brave men yielded up their lives a willing sacrifice for the cause they had espoused.” Remembrance of “sacrifice” re-members the dismembered, reunites the dead with the living, a type or model of the nation restored to itself as “union.” As if preparing the way for Trevalyan in a later generation, Gardner directs the reading of the photographs as visual equivalents of victory, of “union,” not simply in the sense of making a record of victory but by demonstrating in the act of interpretation how victory comes about and especially how victory counts on the imaginative labor of viewers who thereby come to themselves “as American.” The reading of the photographs as collective memory becomes a prime nationalizing experience.

We can see more exactly how this is imagined to occur by the design of the title page of the *Photographic Sketchbook*. Images are sketchily dispersed on the page. With its allusion to hand-drawn impressions made with pen or pencil, sketchbook implies images made on the spot by an eyewitness, someone who was there. Pen and pencil are a far cry from the cumbersome equipment and time-consuming labor of the wet-plate photographer, but subsumes the photographer under the heading of the hand-based arts of visual storytelling or reportage. The organization of the title page divides memory of past scenes—army camp life and battle on the right and left—from the scene of present retelling at the bottom center of the page. The panoramic vista of the entire page promises bird’s eye or “eye of God” unity, a view to which the reader is invited as eyewitness from above, with draped flag framing the vista and affirming its national outlook. Setting sun affirms that war and nation remain embraced by “nature” and its cycles—a healing of pain by sacred memory. Military hierarchy belongs as well to the structure of the national view, officer on right and mounted figure on left obviously, “naturally” social superiors to foot soldiers and diggers of trenches. In the two figures lounging in the foreground, we see a different remembered social order, of male comrades swapping tales around a wilderness campfire, the long rifle at the ready. The design and vignettes of the title page thus prepare a role for the photographs

within what is already (and so acknowledged) a nostalgia, a cultural memory of white frontier manliness and class-based military noblesse oblige.

The unstated predicament that the title page confronts and solves is how to make perception into memory, how to pile trace upon trace in a certain order so that cultural memory—shared (hence public) conception of the way things were that must have brought about the way things are—arrives as a visible tangible of social experience. In other words: how to monumentalize. Gardner gets to the heart of the matter when he writes about a rather quotidian picture of “a mud-bespattered forge,” some mules, and knapsacks and blankets “carelessly thrown on the ground” that if we had been at this same spot earlier, before the picture was made, we would have seen “one of the most magnificent spectacles ever seen in the army,” something “truly grand”: the mass encampment of troops. Now that all that has “passed away,” this decidedly unheroic picture becomes “particularly interesting.” “Interesting as it is,” writes Gardner, “our picture . . . gives but a small portion of the gorgeous whole.”

Mud-spattered forge (symbol of the mechanical fire and brimstone of this war) and mules bring the picture to life as a comic variant of the absent “gorgeous whole.” The disjunction between the gorgeous and the mundane echoes Melville’s sardonic insight in “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight”—that “Orient pomp” no longer befits a war fought by machines, “by crank,/ Pivot, and screw,/ And calculations of caloric.” “The clangor of that blacksmiths’ fray” proclaims that “warriors/ Are now but operatives.” The covert text within the Gardner picture suggests less a missing “whole” than a wholly new picture, not pomp and ceremony but mud, forges, and mules.

Image and text seem more seamless, more transparent to each other in the most famous picture, Timothy O’Sullivan’s “A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July, 1863” (plate 36). The allegorical title disguises the political making of sacral memory as natural process (“harvest”), though ironically so; by dislocating the bloated corpses from their history as objects of political violence and subsuming them under

natural process or “harvest,” irony powerfully jerks the image from the realm of reportorial disclosure of ugly fact into the “gorgeous whole” of cultural memory. “Such a picture conveys a useful moral: it shows the blank horror and reality of war, in opposition to its pageantry. Here are the dreadful details! Let them aid in preventing such another calamity falling upon the nation.”

The text reads the blankness of the image, writes as if upon the yet unseen scene. Fixed in their final agony, the corpses are self-memorializing. Here Gardner articulates the central motive of the photographic project of the war and acknowledges its ideological moment: to transform what is seen and recorded (the camera’s mode of “remembering”) into sacral monument. Appropriately, Gardner’s album concludes not with an image of Appomattox but of the “Dedication of Monument on Bull Run Battle-field, June, 1865” (plate 100). The monument, a stone carving of a classical motif, serves as another ironically dislocated paradigm of the stiffened human remains of the battlefield, analogue of the memorializing function of the photographs. The picture shows the stone shaft in the rear and those performing the dedication immortalizing themselves in the stillness of having their picture taken.

Writing about an exhibition in New York of battlefield photographs showing piled up corpses similar to “A Harvest of Death,” Oliver Wendell Holmes write in *Atlantic Monthly* in July 1863:

Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday. . . . It is so nearly like visiting the battle-field to look over these views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewn with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented.

Holmes had just returned from a visit to the Antietam battlefield in search of his son, and the exhibit of photographs revived his revulsion and fear. The pictures stirred memories too fresh to bear, images that must be buried, as when one hides a photograph in a drawer. The passage illustrates vividly the role of the photograph in the process of distancing and transmuting pain into memory

How to deal with the corpse, the most gruesome and reproaching of the nongorgeous objects of war—the human body frozen in its shock of violent death—was one of the two great challenges to the war photographers. The other was the sight of black people, the visible sign that slavery was what the war was insistently about, slavery the cause of secession, and ultimately the cause of battlefields and corpses unbearable to see. How Gardner deals with blacks in the few pictures that allows them to be seen at all is instructive. One solution is minstrel comedy. Plate 27, “What Do I Want, John Henry? Warrenton, Va., November, 1862,” stages a scene of stereotypical servility. A black youth stands beside a seated officer, poised to serve him a demijohn of whiskey and a plate of food. As if oblivious of his presence three other figures, also white officers, appear in poses that make them seem to believe they are sitting in a photographer’s studio, their eyes gliding off at an angle oblique to the camera. The standing figure may be looking at the transaction between the black servant and his officer, though we cannot tell. The picture makes little effort to hide its stilted triteness, a performance designed to show that even good Union officers know the difference between the white and the black “race” and thus to give comfort to the “whiteness” upon which the nation would seal its reunion under the farce of “reconstruction.” Master and servant might just as well be master and slave. The text speaks of the servant, “John Henry,” as “that affectionate creature” with an “untutored nature.” The caption fills out the portrait of “an unusual capacity for the care of boots and other attentions,” a propensity for his master’s “spirits” and for “the other sex,” and a distaste for “manual labor.”

This stereotype would survive the war and provide a new rallying cry for “union” of North and South, as in the 1912 *Photographic*

History. It appears scattered among the Civil War photographs at large. So do clusters of black refugees on the edge of Union army camps, “contraband” (as former slaves freed by Union forces were known) gathered at depots, and many albums of portraits of black Union soldiers. On the whole, just as Northern rhetoric stressed the cause of “Union,” called the enemy “rebels” rather than slaveholders, and made the defeat of secession rather than of slavery the most loudest rallying cry, the photographic record tends to banish blacks to the margin of visibility, their presence unacknowledged even when plainly there.

A memorable case in point is Plate 94, “A Burial Party, Cold Harbor, Va., April, 1865.”

This sad scene represents the soldiers in the act of collecting the remains of their comrades, killed at the battles of Gaines’ Mill and Cold Harbor. It speaks ill of the residents of that part of Virginia, that they allowed even the remains of those they considered enemies, to decay unnoticed where they fell. The soldiers, to whom commonly falls the task of burying the dead, may possibly have been called away before the task was completed. At such times the native dwellers of the neighborhood would usually come forward and provide sepulture for such as had been left uncovered.

Black “soldiers”—or are they “the native dwellers”?—clean up after those to whom “the task of burying the dead” have “possibly” been called away. This image is Gardner’s only acknowledgement that the Union forces included former slaves, and it presents them in the most menial of roles.

The image resonates beyond text and frame, its grim ironies and bizarre revelations suddenly flashing before us the “remains” Holmes wished to bury from view: decomposing flesh and bleached bones attended by those very humans whose claim to humanity gave cause to the horrors of war. In a gesture so simple it eludes the author of

the text, the two grand invisibilities of the war appear together as one image: death as decomposition and dissolution; blacks laboring in once pastoral fields, reaping an even grimmer harvest than that imagined by "Harvest of Death." The grim image and its equivocal text shows with even grimmer irony how the victors cleansed the war of troubling debris and in the fading replications of the photograph found evidence of a gorgeous whole, the desired sacredness of a bleached cultural memory.

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